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In Search of a Cause

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In Search of a Cause

We do not know the cause of homosexuality. Yes, sin is the root cause of all that is wrong in our world, and it ultimately explains every battle with temptation, every evil deed in our culture, and every visit to a cemetery. Accepting that sin is behind it all, we still wrestle for an explanation: why will some struggle with homosexual attraction and others never will? This article explores current theories and research "in search of a cause."

by Charles Dolph, Ph.D.

Human behavior is very complex. Few human behaviors have a single cause. Instead, behavior is the product of a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. We call this phenomenon "multidimensionality," and it is true of not only sexual behavior but also most other behaviors. If we ask what causes a person to be obese, or aggressive, or depressed, or friendly, or successful, the answer would always be that a variety of factors converge to make a person that way. We do not know *the* cause

of homosexuality because it probably does not have a single cause.

We must, therefore, look for multiple causes and figure out how they combine. This is known as "integration." Look at the cookie recipe on the next page. To produce delicious cookies, we need a variety of ingredients in the proper amounts (note that all do not contribute equally) combined in a specific developmental sequence. (If you bake the ingredients separately before you mix them together,

your cookies will be ruined.) Notice that every ingredient is important to the cookies, but the cookie is more than just flour or sugar or baking soda. There is no way to bake cookies with just one ingredient. In the same way, it is naïve (and can be cruel) to explain homosexuality as the result of just genes, or just choice, or just abuse, or just any other single cause.

Many variables combine to make us who we are. Some play a larger role and some play a lesser role, but they all interact together. The developmental sequence is very important, too. A traumatic event, like being sexually abused or losing a mother, may affect us differently at age 3 than at age 11. We need a careful integrative approach that avoids oversimplification.

Furthermore, two persons may arrive at the same destination by different routes. We call this the law of “equifinality.” Two people may each have identical IQs of 68, but one’s IQ may be due to Down syndrome and the other’s due to severe neglect and deprivation in childhood. Likewise, two persons may each be homosexually oriented but for quite different reasons. Once again, we must avoid the mistakes of oversimplifying and stereotyping. Not all homosexually oriented persons have a domineering mother and emotionally distant father. Not all of those homosexually oriented were sexually abused as children. We must avoid broad, sweeping generalizations that presume all of those struggling with homosexual orientation are the same.

Considering Potential Contributors

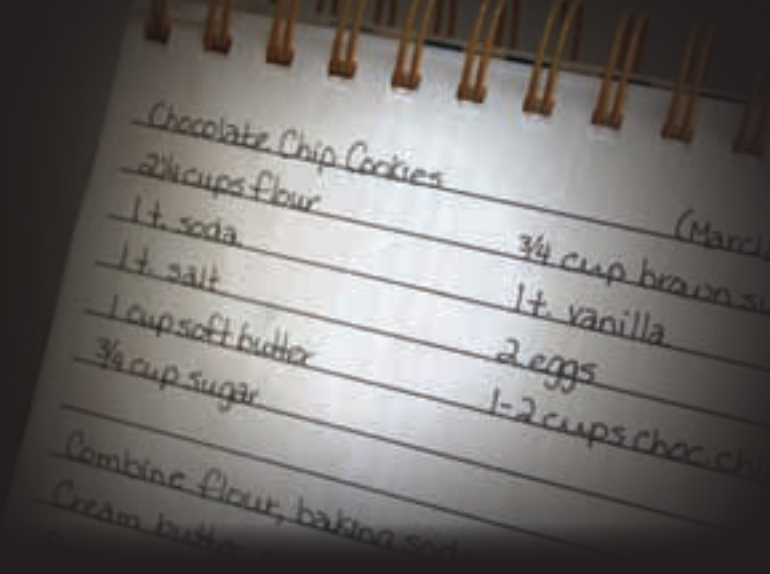
Now that we have developed a framework for evaluating the causes of homosexuality, let’s look at a list of potential contributors. Interestingly, the research evidence is not overwhelming for any of these factors. For some, the research evidence is actually very weak. Nonetheless, we present them all with the understanding that in an equation, some may play a rather small role while others are much more significant, and any number of the factors could be included in the equation.

Biological

Possible biological contributors to homosexuality fall into three categories — genetics, prenatal influences, and brain structures. Some studies have suggested that genetic factors may be involved in homosexuality because concordance rates (the presence of the same trait in both members of a pair of twins) for homosexuality are usually somewhat higher in identical (monozygous) twins than fraternal (dizygous) twins. The overall concordance rates are low, however. If genes are involved, they explain a small amount of the variance, well less than half.

Prenatal influences may be the most fascinating theory of biological predispositions to homosexuality. Evidence from a variety of studies suggests that exposure to abnormal hormone levels in the womb may predispose children toward homosexuality. Elevated estrogen levels, androgen levels, H-Y antigens, stress hormones, and temperament have been suspected to be linked to subsequent homosexuality. Fingerprints, finger length ratio, handedness, and bone lengths have also sometimes been linked to homosexuality. Based on animal studies, we know that the level of hormones in utero and in early development substantially influences animal sexual behavior in adulthood.

One other biological explanation that has received a lot of press, but not much substantial scientific support, is brain structure. Some studies have suggested that various parts of the brain (interstitial nucleus 1–4, anterior commissure, and suprachiasmatic nucleus) differ in the homosexually





oriented. These studies have typically involved small unrepresentative samples and have not been widely replicated.

At this point, none of the biological factors have accrued enough scientific evidence to be considered a cause of homosexuality, but each raises the interesting possibility that it may be a contributor.

Psychological

Most of us are more familiar with psychological and social explanations for homosexuality. Parenting theories such as the dominant, close-binding mother and the absent, detached, or rejecting father trace clear back to Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. The famous National Health and Social Life Survey indicated that sexual abuse during childhood triples the risk for homosexuality in subsequent development. Fraternal birth order suggests that boys with older brothers are more at risk for homosexuality. A male in a male–female twin pair is more likely to act homosexually if he does not have an older brother, as compared to being a part of other sibling patterns. Young children who are gender nonconforming are more likely to act homosexually than children who identify with same-sex peers.

Social

Values, social pressures, models, conformity, labeling, and self-fulfilling prophecies probably all contribute to a person's identification with homosexuality. A fascinating study of homosexual marriage in Denmark, where same-sex marriages have been recorded since they were legalized in 1989, showed that men in same-sex marriages were

more likely to have older mothers, divorced parents, and absent fathers; to be the youngest children; and to be urban born. Women in same-sex marriages were more likely to have been the youngest children, the only children, or the only girls in their families; to have experienced maternal death during adolescence; and to be urban born.

None of these psychological or social factors are an unvarying cause of homosexuality. We all know someone who had a domineering mother, was sexually abused, had an older brother, or was urban born who did not live a homosexual lifestyle. Likewise, we know people who live a homosexual lifestyle yet did not experience any of these things. These factors are potential contributors to — not sole causes of — homosexuality.

Where Does God Fit In?

Where does God fit into this complex recipe? The answer is, He does not fit into the recipe! God is not just one of the variables. The equation is not biological factors, psychological factors, social factors, and God. How demeaning that would be! God is over the recipe. God is sovereignly using each of the influences listed in this article to make us who we are and to accomplish His will. God can ultimately use my genes, my body, my parents, my experiences, my culture — everything — to glorify Himself. Our lives (every aspect of them) are what God gives us to steward for His honor and glory. Each of us must face our sexuality and bring it captive to Jesus Christ. **T**

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